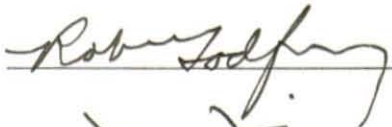


MEMORY, MYTH AND MAGIC:
REVEALING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST

By

Jennifer Lipsey Edwards
A Thesis-Exhibition
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Western Carolina University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts

Committee:



Director







Dean of the Graduate School

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Cullowhee, North Carolina

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Director: Robert Godfrey,
Professor, Department of Art

July 2006

(Includes Slide Compact Disc)

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Abstract

MEMORY, MYTH AND MAGIC: REVEALING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST

Jennifer Lipsey Edwards, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University, August 2006

Director: Robert Godfrey

The thesis exhibition explores the use of memory and its effect on my evolution of a painting. Using the look of simplistic imagery executed on an intuitive level, I have created a body of work based on memories and daydreams of the distant and recent past. By using memory, rather than observation, as the basis for my paintings I have allowed for the spontaneous development of an image beyond the memory, without the constraints or self-imposed limitations of a model in nature such as a tangible object, figures or photographic references.

MEMORY, MYTH AND MAGIC: REVEALING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST

The focus of my thesis exhibition was to create a body of work based upon memory. This work explores personal memories and how these memories evolve and transform themselves into art. I have discovered through this process that as I paint, intuitive impulses cause me to stray from the original memory, which results in the work becoming something unique and often very different from the imagined representation. I began this body of work by revisiting childhood memories. If memories were to be my inspiration, then I would go back to the beginning of the moments I remembered. Edgar Degas said, "It is very well to copy what one sees; it's much better to draw what one has retained in one's memory. It is a transformation in which imagination collaborates with memory."¹

The use of brighter colors rather than primarily earth tones and the incorporation of a simplistic symbolic and figurative language rather than purely non-objective compositions has been influenced by my experience teaching art to young children as well as writing and illustrating a children's instructional art book series. These experiences have also influenced me in ways I had not anticipated. While teaching and illustrating I began to remember my own childhood memories more deeply. I started to recall moments or events that were funny, frightening, exciting, or embarrassing. These memories became a selection of possible subjects for drawings or paintings. As many of

¹ Edgar Degas, *Resource of Art Quotations*, The Painter's Keys, 2006, <http://www.painterskeys.com/getquotes.asp?fname=lp&ID=185>, 7 July 2006.

the ideas took form in my art, I began to understand that my memories, or at least the themes of my memories, were not so different from those of most other human beings. Fear, play, love, pain, joy, wonder...these are the themes that solidify a moment as a memory. Something else happens when these memories are extracted in the telling, writing, drawing or painting. Jean Dubuffet said:

We mustn't confuse the things the eyes apprehend with what results when the mind receives them.... The mind totalizes; it recapitulates all fields; it makes them dance together. It shuffles them, exchanges them, everything is astir. It also transforms them, cooks them in its sauces. It favors certain places, abolishes others. There is a great loss in what the eyes have caught when the mind gets hold of things. There is also a great addition; for the mind has quickly transfigured, substituting its own images for the ones it receives, mingling its own secretions with what the eye sends.¹

I began to depict the feeling of the moment in the drawings and paintings instead of an attempt at exact representation of the memory. In *Untitled (My Monsters)* (Figure 1) the image of the memory changed, simplified, and evolved as it took shape in a tangible two-dimensional space. To maintain a line quality that wasn't quite so facile from years of art school I drew with my non-dominant (left) hand much of the time. The thickly outlined monsters are filled with vibrant colors and cover the upper half of the composition, which contrasts and presses down against the delicate, almost transparent sleeping girl and her room occupying the space in line only. This emphasizes a physical existence of fear and fantasy similar to the effect of Dorothy's black and white farm in contrast to the brilliant color dream world of the Land of Oz.

¹ Jean Dubuffet, untitled introduction in *Theatres de Memoire* (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1976), p. v (unnumbered).



Figure 1. *Untitled (My Monsters)*, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 19 x 25 in.

Bad Dream (Figure 2) is a large mixed media painting finished as I continued to work with images of monsters and themes of fearful memories. In it, the space is flattened and the brushwork is rough and unpolished. The eyes of the monster hover around the girl while the face of the monster consists only of a large, frightening mouth, ready to devour her innocence. Large oval shapes with attached smaller and slightly awkward ovals are on either side of the girl. The symmetry of these shapes references flowers and is reminiscent of the forms and symbols found in early child art and prehistoric art. Perhaps they are stand-ins for the presence of other individuals who are not active in the scene. The flowers also simultaneously emphasize a sense of innocence and perhaps sexuality – not unlike what some might speculate of Georgia O’Keefe’s flowers.



Figure 2. *Bad Dream*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 53 x 37 ¼ in.

Susan Rothenberg said in an interview “you don’t have to go out and look at a horse to draw its presence.”² Since these memories exist only in my mind until they are released into the art, I had to trust myself to go deeper into the themes of childhood. To be a child with an inclination to play, compete and pretend while at the same time becoming acutely aware of bodily changes in one’s self and other children is an often exciting, but usually confusing and shameful journey. Although I was not consciously setting out to try to describe these things in *Slip and Slide* (Figure 3), they appear intuitively and spontaneously in the shapes, figures and other imagery. For example, the central figure is wearing a two-piece bikini, foreshadowing budding breasts while the largest vertical figure has exaggerated breasts – a sock-stuffed dream of most American girls. The main subject has large, lip-sticked, somewhat creepy pink lips, possibly

² Robert Enright, “An Interview with Susan Rothenberg: The Humanizer,” *Border Crossings*, issue 95 (2005): 27.

leftover from an earlier session of playing dress-up. All the other children are watching and cheering along as the young girl literally slips and slides towards adulthood.



Figure 3. *Slip and Slide*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 60 x 83 in.

The paint, lines and marks were put down quickly and instinctively. This stresses the movement and fleetingness of both the painting and youth. The blue-green color behind the scene and the surrounding large sun or radial shape was applied with a hardware store paint roller. The egg-like shape in the center of the composition encompasses the activities of the picture. I began the painting with this primitive shape and continued to emphasize its importance throughout the process of the painting. This shape is the heartbeat of the picture and it radiates behind the main figure like the sun or a creative pulse pushing her forward.

All of the other painted elements of the picture, the figures, flowers and the slip and slide, a large yellow band overlapping and dividing the composition into a slight diagonal, were finger painted in a rapid and spontaneous manner.

As the paint begins to dry in sections of the image I start to draw with oil pastels and oil sticks. The drawing becomes critical to the painting. It reinforces shapes, helps emphasize a sense of movement and can hint at solidity in a mostly transparent form, as in the figure in the lower left corner of Figure 4. The painting is larger than I am, which forces me to approach it with my whole body and use sweeping movements originating from my shoulders rather than my wrists. This helps me to engage with the painting in a more physical way and not to get overly exacting. Automatic drawing with both hands simultaneously helps me to keep moving over the surface of the canvas and to maintain an impulsive quality in the picture.

After completing a number of paintings and drawings, I began to question whether this work needed to be based on childhood memories. Could I use memories as a source from just a few years ago? Last week? This morning? Joan Mitchell said that she carried her landscapes around with her.³ I have realized that the age of a memory is irrelevant to its potency for inspiring an image, and that these mental possessions are available to me at any time. In *Untitled* (Figure 5) and *Untitled* (Figure 6) the energy, or the essence, of the subject has taken over the factual depiction of the memory. The memory is recent and is personally relevant to the present moment in time that suggests a dynamic presence unsullied by too much reflection.

³ Arthur C. Danto, "Mitchell Paints a Picture," *The Nation*, 16 September, 2002, 26.



Figure 4. *Untitled*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 20 x 20 in.

My investigation into memory and the making of a body of work for the thesis exhibition has been valuable in that it did not close down. I am not left to speculate what I will paint now that I have completed the exhibition. Instead, the exploration has opened up important possibilities, imagery, and methods in making art.

As I complete new work such as *Untitled* (Figure 5) and *Untitled* (Figure 6) I am taking from what I have absorbed from the experience of the thesis exhibition. Having a more innate understanding of the use of color, line and form, and further involvement in engaging the use of memory, I am able to let a painting emerge more instinctively and fluidly as I employ memories or feelings, without over-thinking the process or the outcome. In my art, my aim is to possess rather than merely picture, and the work for my thesis exhibition has proven to be invaluable in obtaining the insight necessary to continue this pursuit.

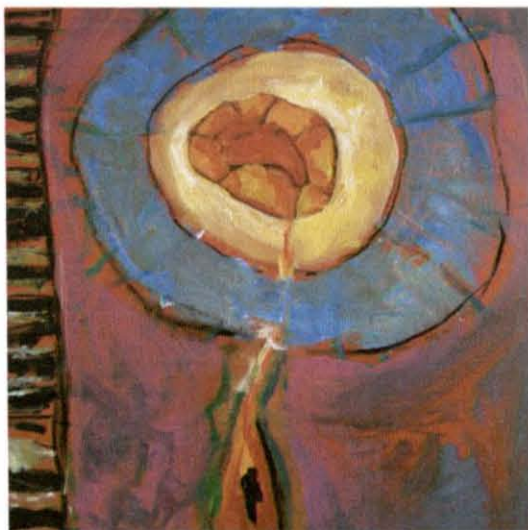


Figure 5. *Untitled*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 20 x 20 in.

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Appendix

List of Compact Disc Images

1. *Untitled*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 20 x 20 in.
2. *Untitled*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 20 x 20 in.
3. *Happy Birthday*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 39 ¼ x 59 ½ in.
4. *No, no. You have to do it like this*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 54 x 44 in.
5. *Slip and Slide*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 60 x 83 in.
6. *Now it's your turn*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 32 x 40 in.
7. *Bad Dream*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 53 x 37 ¼ in.
8. *Swimming Pool*, 2006. Mixed media on canvas, 54 x 78 in.

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Jennifer Lipsey Edwards July 2006

Thesis: M.F.A. (Exhibition) July 2006 with MS

